

Teaching Pronunciation - Why?

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Learning to pronounce a language is a very complex task, and the learning process can be facilitated if the learner is aware of exactly what is involved. It is obviously difficult for learners to do this for themselves. So the teacher's job is to help learners by dividing the language into its components, such as sounds, syllables, stress, and intonation. The learner needs to understand the functions of these components as well as their forms.

Once learners are aware that English words have a stress pattern, that words can be pronounced in slightly different ways, and that the pitch of the voice can be used to convey meaning, they will know what to pay attention to and can build upon this basic awareness. Learners also need to develop an awareness of the way they pronounce words. Egyptian students face certain problems related to pronunciation. Some of these problems are related to stress, others are related to intonation. However, most of these problems can be attributed to the differences in pronunciation between English and Arabic.

Stress

It is important for students to know which words of a sentence are stressed and which are not. English words can be divided into two groups:

- a) Content words: These express independent meaning. Content words include nouns, main verbs, adverbs, adjectives, question words, and demonstratives. Content words are usually stressed.
- b) Function words: These have little or no meaning in themselves, but they express grammatical relationships. Function words include articles, prepositions, auxiliaries, pronouns, conjunctions, and relative pronouns. Function words are usually unstressed unless they are to be given special attention.

While all content words receive major word stress, one content word within a particular sentence will receive greater stress than all the others. This type of emphasis is referred to as the major sentence stress. In most cases, the major sentence stress falls on the last content word within a sentence.

In English there is a special relationship between the different parts of a word. In an English word of two or more syllables, one of these will have a stress. If the learner does not stress one syllable more than another, or stresses the wrong syllable, it may be very difficult for the listener to identify the word. The stress pattern of a word is an important part of its identity for the native speaker and may affect comprehensibility.

Generally speaking, stressed words are different in three ways:

- They are louder.
- They are spoken with a different pitch.
- They are usually lengthened.

Stress is also used to emphasize information in a sentence. Usually the words that are stressed are the ones that give new information to the listener, information that the listener does not really know. In the following statement, the speaker is introducing the subject: "I went to the movies last night" (no change in pitch). But if it is an answer to the question "Where did you go last night?" the answer should stress "the movies." If the question is "Who went to the movies last night?" the answer should stress "I," and so on.

When using someone's name, we separate the name a bit from the rest of the sentence. The pitch is often different from the rest of the sentence, and the name is stressed. Look at this example:

"Ali, I'd like you to meet Carol."

This is an introduction. "Ali" is slightly separated from the rest of the sentence and it is stressed. The teacher can use countless examples to show students how stress affects the meaning.

Intonation

Speech is like music in that it uses changes in pitch. Speakers can change the pitch of their voice, making it higher or lower at will. So speech has a melody called intonation. The two melodies are rising and falling. These can be very sudden or gradual and can be put together in various combinations (rise-fall-rise, fall-rise-fall, etc.).

Speakers use pitch to send various messages. For example, if Ali had said "There isn't any salt on the table," Carol might have repeated the same words but with gradually rising pitch. This would have had the effect of sending a message such as "Are you sure? I am amazed. I was sure I put it there." Alternatively, Carol might want to send the message "There is salt somewhere, but not on the table," in which case she could do this by using a falling then rising pitch on the word "table."

What does intonation do?

1. Intonation is used to put certain words in the foreground. Speakers use pitch to give words stress. There are two ways in which pitch is used: a) the speaker can emphasize a word by jumping up in pitch, and (b) the speaker can use varying pitch, rising or falling sharply, to make a word stand out.

2. Low pitch is used to put things in the background, to treat something as old, to show anger, or as shared information.
3. Intonation is used to signal ends and beginnings in conversation.
4. It is used to show whether a situation is open or closed. A high or rising pitch indicates an open situation, whereas a falling pitch indicates a closed situation.
5. Intonation is used to show expectations. Strong expectations are shown by low or falling pitch, whereas lack of expectations is shown by high or rising pitch. The best example here is the use of the question tag. With a falling pitch on the tag, this shows that we expect the answer to be "No." (He doesn't speak Russian, does he?)

Teaching Pronunciation to Arabic-speaking Students

There is a difference in the comparative force of pronunciation of stressed and unstressed syllables in English and Arabic. In English there is a great difference in force: unstressed syllables can be pronounced very weakly; stressed syllables can be fully pronounced. In Arabic this difference is not nearly so extreme; unstressed syllables can have full vowels and be pronounced fairly clearly.

Sentence stress in Arabic is similar to that in English. Content words are usually stressed, and function words are usually unstressed. However, there are two differences that can lead to problems:

1. Function words in Arabic do not have two forms. Vowels in words in an unstressed position keep their "full" value, unlike vowels in unstressed words in English, which are reduced to "schwa."
2. Verb phrases do not occur in Arabic. Therefore, teachers of English have to pay special attention to errors such as the use of full forms of auxiliary verbs when the weak form should be used ("I can /kan/ do it" instead of "I can /kən/ do it"). It will sound as if the speaker is protesting or denying a previous statement ("I can do it even though you say I can't"), when this meaning is not intended.

The most noticeable difference between English and Arabic with regard to intonation is that Arabic tends to use a narrower range of falling pitch over the phrase or clause. To the English speaker's ear, this may be interpreted as a lack of the correct completion signals and may give an impression of inconclusiveness.

Another difficulty that teachers of English to Arabic-speaking students usually encounter is the absence of certain English sounds in Arabic, like /p/ and /v/. This makes it difficult for students to pronounce correctly words containing such sounds.

References

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